

By email to public@public-standards.gov.uk

Thursday 9 November 2017

Dear Lord Bew

Review of Intimidation of Parliamentary Candidates

At the hearing on 14 September you asked for the parties to provide further information on the number and course of action that are taken against members who harass candidates from other parties.

Since 2014 the Liberal Democrats have operated an online complaints system, which comes directly to our Pastoral Care Officer, who will take up each case and ensure that it is referred to the relevant part of the party. Our complaints system doesn't distinguish between the type of complaint, so it has proved difficult to get accurate figures on the specific harassment of candidates from other parties, whether for the General Election or local elections.

The party is clear that members have both rights and responsibilities which are summarised on our website [https://www.libdems.org.uk/complaints_member_rights_responsibilities] (attached as Appendix 1). All members of the party are expected to abide by the Code of Conduct [<https://www.libdems.org.uk/doc-code-of-conduct>] (attached as Appendix 2). These two documents are used as the basis for taking the appropriate action against members who breach the Code.

Resolutions for disciplinary cases include expulsion from the party; ban on standing for or holding elected office (either public or internal); a period of retraining and mentoring during which their membership is kept on review; or clearing them of the allegations. In the more serious cases the party will suspend the member pending a hearing. Increasingly, we also look at patterns of behaviour, particularly relevant in cases of social media harassment, where one incident on its own might not be enough to trigger a full investigation, but a number of small complaints together demonstrate a problem.

We started to log formally our complaints system from 2014, and over the three year period the Pastoral Care Officer has received 386 complaints about the behaviour of party members. The number of complaints so far in 2017 is 31, compared with 55 for 2016. The behaviour described by complainants tends to range from inappropriate behaviour, harassment and general rudeness and also includes behaviour on social media. Complaints on social media behaviour to date in 2017 are 26, compared with 104 in 2016, but it is worth noting that in 2016 the majority of the complaints

(77) related to two individuals, neither remain in the party one was expelled and the other resigned before the m. If you remove complaints about these two people the 2016 complaints figure is 27. We would note that there has been no spike in complaints of social media use during elections periods.

So far in 2017 the number of members expelled or suspended because of their behaviour (including social media) is 11, but it is not clear how many of these are for behaviour against members of other parties.

I hope that this is helpful information, and wish to reassure you that the Liberal Democrats take seriously any complaints against members of the party, and that our processes ensure that where a case is proven, we will take action. Please let me know if you require any further information.

Yours sincerely,



Baroness Sal Brinton
President of the Liberal Democrats

My rights & responsibilities

Your Rights

- **You have the right to be treated with respect**

This applies to all members, staff, and volunteers. Treating others with respect includes not bullying, harassing, or intimidating them. It also means, at the most basic level, treating others as you would wish to be treated.

- **You have the right to be treated equally**

The Liberal Democrats will not discriminate as to age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, or sex.

- **You have the right to be treated fairly**

This is in regard to all aspects of Party life – from the workings of your local party to your dealings with Federal bodies, committees, and members of staff.

- **You have the right to be treated within the party rules**

All action that the party takes towards you will be within its own rules. These can be found in the Federal and State Constitutions, in each State Party's membership rules, and in additional operational documents.

- **You have the right to make a complaint in confidence**

Any complaint you make will be treated on a 'need to know' basis, and no information will be passed on without your consent.

Your Responsibilities

- **You have the responsibility to treat others with respect**

As a member, you have a responsibility not to bully, harass, or intimidate other members, volunteers, party employees, members of the Parliamentary staff, or members of the public.

- **You have the responsibility to treat others without bias**

The Liberal Democrats reject all prejudice and discrimination, and are opposed to all forms of entrenched privilege and inequality. As a Liberal Democrat, you will not discriminate as to age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, or sex.

- **You have the responsibility not to bring the party into disrepute**

'Bringing the party into disrepute' refers to your behaviour both as a Liberal Democrat and as an individual. You should never behave in a way which could negatively impact the reputation of the Party if your behaviour was to be made public.

Appendix 2

Members' Code of Conduct

The Members' Code of Conduct was approved by the Federal Executive on the 7th March 2014.

Our Constitution begins with these words:

'The Liberal Democrats exist to build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, and in which no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity. We champion the freedom, dignity and well-being of individuals, we acknowledge and respect their right to freedom of conscience and their right to develop their talents to the full,'

This applies as much to the internal working of our party as to the type of society we wish to build.

As a member you have the right to be treated fairly, equally, and within the bounds of party rules. You also have the responsibility to behave in a way that does not negatively impact other members, staff, volunteers, people who interact with the Party in a professional capacity, or the party's reputation.

We encourage robust and passionate debate on policy, strategy and the way in which the party functions. We also expect our members to behave lawfully and honestly, to be sensitive to other people's feelings and respect their right to have and express different views to their own.

Our responsibilities as party members apply not only to our personal conduct but also to our conduct in communications, including electronic ones and with the media in all its forms.

Here is a checklist of questions you should ask yourself as you act internally or externally:

- Could what I am intending to do or say or write (in any format) be taken as intimidation, harassment or bullying?

- Am I acting in the party's best interests?
- Am I declaring all my interests if asked to make such a declaration?
- Is what I am doing compliant with electoral law?
- Is what I'm doing compliant with data protection law and the party's data protection standards?
- Can we afford what I am planning to do?
- Is what I'm doing in line with our constitution and rules?

If you are unsure about any of these then take advice before acting. Your local party officers, regional officers and national officers are there to help and interpret. They can act as sounding boards for any action. Our staff at local, regional and national level are there to support you and are the appropriate sources of expertise on all legal and constitutional requirements.

We do need to make it clear that behaviour which is unlawful, dishonest, deceitful, violent, or threatening will constitute bringing the Party into disrepute, will constitute grounds for disciplinary action under the Party Constitution. We should also remind you that the party reserves the right to refer any breach of this code of conduct which breaks the criminal law to the police rather than/ as well as dealing with it under this code of conduct.

Our hope is that we never have to do this. With your support we can challenge others who seem to be acting against the spirit of this code and support those who are role models. In this way we can ensure that we encourage the best in ourselves to thrive and grow.